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ABSTRACT

Teaching assistants (TAs) play a considerable role in undergraduate education. Adopting a developmental perspective could lead TA supervisors and other faculty members to facilitate the maturation of their graduate students/TAs into tomorrow's professors more successfully. According to J. Sprague and J. D. Nyquist (1989), there are 4 questions for supervisors to consider in gathering information about where individual TAs are in their development and what leadership and interventions are most appropriate: (1) What are their communication concerns? (2) How do they talk about their discipline? (3) How do they relate to authority? and (4) How do they relate to their students? A proposed study seeks to provide a response to Sprague and Nyquist's (1990) call for descriptive studies of the actual changes that TAs in Speech Communication go through. The longitudinal study will provide a description of the professional development of 12-16 graduate TAs over time (3 full academic years), paying special attention to 3 factors which seem likely to be significant: age, previous teaching experience, and previous other fulltime work experience. The study could lead to an extension of understanding through attempting to apply this model to the ongoing process of development of a number of beginning TAs. The study may provide TA supervisors with some factors to take into account as they consider supervisory strategies, and may also lead to refinements in a model of TA development. (Eighteen references are attached.) (PRA)

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THE ROLE OF AGE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

a research proposal

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Paper presented to the Instructional/Developmental Division
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THE ROLE OF AGE AND EXPERIENCE IN THE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

a research proposal

Graduate teaching assistants (TAs) play an important role in university education, both as teachers and developing scholars. Today's graduate student TAs will become the professoriate of tomorrow. Not only are TAs learning the content and ways of thinking of their specific disciplines, but they are also becoming socialized into a professional role. In investigating the development of professional role commitment among graduate students, Weiss (1981) suggests that the TA role is the best preparation for a future faculty role. Learning to be a TA, and learning as a TA, are important components in the development of future faculty members.

But the importance of TAs to higher education is certainly not limited to their future impact. TAs play a major role in undergraduate education. In 1989-90 at my institution, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, TAs taught about 20 percent of

the total undergraduate credit hours. In many institutions, TAs account for 25 to 38 percent of undergraduate instruction (Nyquist, Abbott, Wulff & Sprague, 1991). At some institutions, TAs meet half or more of the instructional demand on the campus (Darling & Dewey, 1989). Speech Communication departments routinely assign TAs responsibility as teachers of record for class sections (Sprague & Nyquist, 1990). In the Speech Communication Department at SIUC, TAs accounted for nearly two-thirds of all instructors in fall 1990.

TAs clearly play a significant role in undergraduate instruction. But most new TAs have little or no formal background in education. This places a dual burden on the shoulders of the person responsible for TA training and supervision. Not only must that faculty member prepare individual TAs to take on their immediate instructional responsibilities, but she or he must also facilitate the TA's long-term professional development.

Developmental Perspective on the TA Role

The question for the TA supervisor is how best to do that. Sprague and Nyquist (1991) urge supervisors to take a developmental perspective in their relationships with TAs. They identify three general phases of TA development (senior learner, colleague in training and junior colleague), and suggest that supervisors emphasize the role of manager in the first phase,

educational role model in the second, and professional mentor in the third (Sprague & Nyquist, 1989). They offer four questions for supervisors to consider in gathering information about where individual TAs are in their development and what leadership and interventions are most appropriate: What are their communication concerns? How do they talk about their discipline? How do they relate to authority? And how do they relate to their students?" (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991)

Communication concerns

Staton-Spicer and Bassett (1979) determined that teacher communication concerns can be categorized according to the self as communicator/teacher, the task of communicating/teaching, and the impact of one's communication/teaching on others. These concerns differ, they reported, according to the stage of training and level of experience: prospective and new teachers primarily express self concerns, while experienced teachers primarily express impact concerns.

Critical thinking about the discipline

Listening to TAs talk about their discipline will give the TA supervisor an idea of how sophisticated the TA is in her/his thinking about the field. Sprague and Nyquist (1991) suggest that the TA's intellectual growth follows a spiral model of development: at the novice or presocialized level, the TA does

not understand the discipline's complexities, nor can he/she effectively use its conventions; at the intermediate or socialized level, the TA is immersed in the discipline and only converses in its language; and at the advanced or postsocialized level, the TA can appreciate similarities and differences in other fields, and can explain ideas of the discipline to those outside it.

Relationship to authority

Considering how the TA relates to authority can reveal how well established the TA's sense of self as a professional and a thinker is. To develop as a scholar, the TA must break from reliance on authority figures to experience autonomy and separateness before an interdependent, collegial acceptance within a community of professionals is achieved (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991).

Relationship to students

Sprague and Nyquist (1991) outline three phases in the development of TAs' views of their students. Beginning TAs will hold a highly engaged view of their students that is characterized by a sense of vulnerability or ego involvement on the TA's part. Students may be viewed as friends or peers, or as sources of threat to their authority. "Whether the relationship with students is positive or negative, it is intense, personal,

and consuming" (Sprague & Nyquist, 1991, p. 309). At the intermediate phase, TAs are detached, and may see their students as sources of feedback or subjects in educational experiments. At the most advanced level are TAs who have a professional relationship with their "client" students; these teachers are highly engaged with their students as individuals and emotionally involved in their success.

A developmental perspective to TA supervision would help supervising faculty members become aware that TAs at different developmental phases have quite different supervisory needs. But it may be challenging initially to identify each TA's level of professional development, since even beginning TAs may have reached varying developmental levels before starting the assistantship.

Diversity in "Beginning" TAs

The proposed study will seek to describe the professional development of a group of TAs. The study will trace the actual changes the TAs go through in regard to the four major questions Sprague and Nyquist (1991) delineated. The study will seek a range of "beginning" TAs, and pay special attention to three factors--age, previous teaching experience, and previous other fulltime work experience--which seem likely to impact a TA's professional development.

People do not become TAs out of nowhere. Many people come to graduate school, and assistantships, straight from an undergraduate program. Others have been out of school for years, perhaps in the workplace, perhaps not. Some of those "beginning" TAs will have teaching experience, maybe a master's degree, perhaps even years of experience teaching at the college level. Others may have considerable experience in a profession other than teaching.

Beginning TAs may range in age from their early 20s to more than twice that age. Increasing age seems likely to change how one moves through the world, so it follows that age may well influence a TA's development. In his epigenetic theory Erikson (1963, 1980) suggests that identity resolution is the developmental issue most central to college-age students. For Erikson, the struggle between identity and role confusion involves coming to terms with the question "Who am I?" The issue often includes vocational, life-style and value commitments. Other developmental issues generally encountered during young and middle adulthood are intimacy vs. isolation and generativity vs. self-absorption and stagnation. Intimacy, for Erikson, involves the capacity to make deep commitments and abide by them without losing one's sense of identity. In generativity the focus is on the investment of self in one's society. One grows in commitment to productive work, including the raising and teaching of the

next generation; or one tends to become stagnant and self-centered. "Generativity encompasses procreativity, productivity, and creativity" (Erikson, 1982, p. 67).

Chickering (1969) extended Erikson's stages of identity and intimacy to propose seven vectors along which development occurs: developing competence, managing emotions, developing autonomy, establishing identity, freeing interpersonal relationships, developing purpose and developing integrity. "Development along each vector involves cycles of differentiation and integration; that is, movement toward increasing complexity" (McEwen, Higgins, and Pipes, 1982, p. 164).

Perry (1981) suggested four basic stages in the cognitive development of college students: dualism, a dichotomous view of knowledge; multiplicity, in which more than two perspectives are recognized for a given question; contextual relativism, when multiple perspectives can be seen to fit into a larger context; and commitment in relativism, in which persons internalize a set of values that they will demonstrate through responsible action in a pluralistic world.

Erikson's stage approach suggests that adults pass through particular stages at particular times in their lives. While other developmental theorists are careful to avoid pegging typical ages to developmental levels (for example, Loevinger, 1982), it seems highly likely that a twenty-one-year-old recent

college graduate and a forty-four-year-old seeking added credentials could be expected to be at quite different developmental stages. The beginning TA for whom generativity is a predominant developmental issue seems likely to have different capabilities and supervisory needs than the beginning TA struggling with identity issues.

Kohlberg's (1971) theory of moral development contends that a person grows from stage to stage "because cognitive structural reorganizations toward the more equilibrated occur in the course of interaction between the organism and the environment." This interaction between the individual and his/her environment could be called experience. Kohlberg argued that all cognitive developmental theories postulate this interaction--experience--as that which leads to development. Our forty-four-year-old, with many more years of experience interacting with the environment, will likely have developed quite differently from the twenty-one-year-old recent graduate. They can be expected to be grappling with some very different developmental issues, and to have vastly different supervisory needs. Yet both might be included in a group of "beginning" TAs.

Previous teaching experience, even at the elementary level, seems likely to have a significant influence on a <u>teaching</u> assistant's professional development. The skills one has developed as a teacher, and the confidence that comes with

experience, should generalize in large measure to the TA experience. Experience as a teacher will generally include performance of many of the instructional, interactive, administrative and institutional roles expected of the TA (Allen & Reuter, 1990).

The sense of self and skills that develop with nonteaching fulltime work experience could also contribute to the professional development of a beginning TA. Even if the work did not have an instructional component, it may have given the new TA experience analogous to the "interactive" roles the TA must play: feedback provider, giver of advice, counselor, and tutor (Allen & Reuter, 1990). Too, the work experience may have prepared the beginning TA to fulfill administrative roles ranging from making plans to keeping records, and institutional roles including being an office mate, a member of a course staff, and a citizen of an organization. Nonteaching work experience can be expected to influence the new TA's development.

Focus of the Proposed Study

The proposed study will seek to describe the professional development of some TAs. Special attention will be paid to the effect of age and experience on that development. Three questions frame the research project: (1) Does the TA's age influence her/his development? (2) Does the amount of the TA's previous teaching experience influence her/his professional

development? and (3) Does the amount and type of previous nonteaching fulltime work experience influence the TA's development?

A TA's degree of professional development at a given moment involves cognitive and affective dimensions. This study will look at TA development in the four key areas Sprague and Nyquist (1991) outlined: communication concerns, level of sophistication in thinking about the field, relation to authority and to students. Sprague and Nyquist suggested TA supervisors gather data about the developmental level of TAs by asking them what they are concerned about, and by listening to them talk about their discipline and about their students. So, the proposed study will use interview procedures and interpretive methodology.

Methods and procedures

The estimated 12 to 16 participants in the study will be drawn from the pool of incoming TAs in the Speech Communication Department at SIUC. A preliminary survey of the entire pool will be conducted to generate age and resume data, along with information about scholarly focus. Using these data, a maximum variation sampling strategy will be employed to ensure as much variation in age and experience as possible (McMillan & Schumacher, 1989, p. 183). A secondary criterion for selection would be the new TA's area of specialization. The department

offers four research emphases at the doctoral level (performance studies, communication and instruction, interpersonal communication, and philosophy of communication); the selection strategy will seek participants in each of the areas. Up to 16 participants will be selected, in order to allow for those TAs who might drop out of the study, whether because they accept a nonteaching appointment, finish a master's degree, or decide to leave the program.

Participants will be interviewed before the start of the fall semester, and again at the middle and end of the semester. Interviews will again be conducted at the beginning, middle and end of the five subsequent semesters, covering three full academic years, in an attempt to trace the development of the TAs over an adequate span of time. The three-year span was chosen because that is the duration of the teaching assistantship funding provided by the department for doctoral students.

A longitudinal approach was chosen for this study in order to generate a description of the professional development of specific graduate TAs over time. This approach will ask the same questions of the same people at regular intervals; changes in their communication concerns, how they talk about their discipline, and how they relate to their students and authority will become evident from the interviews. A cross-sectional study would take much less time, but would not describe the development

of individual TAs. A cross-sectional approach would provide one set of snapshots of representative TAs at different places in their graduate careers; but the pictures would all be taken at the same time, and any development on the part of the TAs themselves would have to be assumed. The snapshots provided by the longitudinal approach would chart the growth of specific TAs--assuming there is growth--like a series of photographs taken of a child at intervals as she grows. Photos of two people at different ages would not say as much about a person's development as would a series of photos of the same person taken over time.

The data will be in the form of interview records and transcripts. Each participant's responses will be analyzed, and a level of development will be attributed in each of the four outlined areas. Each TA's developmental level will be assessed and charted after each of the eighteen interviews. The developmental placements will be analyzed not only in light of the individual TAs' changes, but also in comparison with the other participants in the study. Since the researcher and participants will be colleagues within the department, informal, unplanned conversations may supplement the formal interview data.

The interview guide will contain questions relating to each of the four key indicators. Tentative questions for an interview guide would include:

--When you think about your teaching and communication, what

are your concerns? (Staton-Spicer & Bassett, 1979; Staton-Spicer & Marty-White, 1981)

--What interests you about your field right now? How do you see the discipline fitting into the larger scholarly community?

--What sort of relationship do you have with your TA supervisor? What do you need from her/him?

--What sort of relationship do you have with your students? How would you characterize them?

Probes and follow-up questions will be generated during the individual interview sessions. More detailed age and resume data will be collected from the participants at the outset of the study.

Significance and Conclusion

TAs play a considerable role in undergraduate education. And today's TAs are in training to become the professors of tomorrow. Adopting a developmental perspective can lead TA supervisors and other faculty members to more successfully facilitate the maturation of their graduate students/TAs.

The proposed study seeks to provide a response to Sprague and Nyquist's (1990) call for descriptive studies of the actual changes that TAs in Speech Communication go through. The study will provide a test of Sprague and Nyquist's (1991) developmental model over time, with special attention to three factors which seem likely to be significant. The study can lead to an

extension of understanding through attempting to apply this model to the ongoing process of development of a number of beginning TAs. The study may provide TA supervisors with some factors to take into account as they consider supervisory strategies. The study may also lead to refinements in a model of TA development.

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